**ERRATA**

*Population Bulletin,* Volume 45, No. 4

Figure 1, page 5. Population Density in Germany, by State, 1990

The color for the fourth population density category: "1,000-4,000 inhabitants per square kilometer was printed incorrectly. Three areas, Bremen, Berlin, and Hamburg are included in this category.

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Vol. 46, No. 1 July 1991

PRB

# Population Bulletin

*A publication of the Population Reference Bureau, Inc.*

# African Americans in the 1990s

*by William P. O'Hare, Kelvin M. Pollard, Taynia L. Mann, and Mary M. Kent*

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**POPULATION BULLETIN**
Vol. 46, No. 1
July 1991

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# African Americans in the 1990s

***by William P. O'Hare, Kelvin M. Pollard, Taynia L. Mann, and Mary M. Kent***

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African Americans—30 million in number in 1991—are the largest and most visible minority group in the United States. Because of their population size, along with their legacy of slavery and legal subjugation, blacks occupy a special niche in U.S. society. We often view the progress of blacks as a litmus test of how open our society really is. Furthermore, as African Americans become a larger share of the U.S. population, the black experience assumes a greater part of our national character.

Blacks have made significant progress on many fronts since the 1950s and 1960s, when major civil rights legislation was enacted. In general, the education, health, living conditions, and incomes of African Americans have improved. Many more blacks vote in elections and get elected to public office. But the remarkable progress of the post-World War II era appears to have slowed during the 1980s, even regressed in some areas. And African Americans still rank below whites on nearly every measure of socioeconomic status.

The gap between the well-being of blacks and whites is continuing evidence of the second-class status of African Americans. Black infants are twice as likely to die as are white infants. Black children are nearly three times more likely to live in a single-parent family or to live in poverty than are white children. Blacks are only half as likely to go to college; those who earn college degrees have incomes one-third less than do whites with the same education. And, while the number of affluent blacks has skyrocketed over the past decade, the net wealth of black households is only one-tenth that of whites.

Why has the progress of African Americans slowed? Many observers feel that Ronald Reagan's presidential administration, which dominated national politics during most of the 1980s, was particularly harmful to black socioeconomic advancement,

Note: The terms "African American" and "black" are used interchangeably in this report. The term "white" refers to all whites, including Hispanics, unless specifically stated otherwise. Hispanics may be of any race, but the majority are white.

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erasing civil rights gains and promoting a general anti-minority climate. Others see a myriad of factors that combined to thwart the progress of blacks. Some of these factors have polarized American society in general, widening the gap between rich and poor and chipping away at the middle class. Among African Americans, opportunities continue to open up for the educated middle class while the urban poor appear stuck in a quagmire of unstable families, intermittent employment, welfare dependence, and the temptations of crime.

This view of black Americans as living within two increasingly separate worlds gained wide acceptance during the 1980s. William Julius Wilson, a sociologist at the University of Chicago who emerged as a major analyst of U.S. blacks in the past decade, argues that economic changes, combined with social and demographic forces within the black community, produced these countervailing trends.[1] Wilson contends that the urban poor became more impoverished and more isolated because the decline of manufacturing and the movement of many blue-collar jobs to suburban areas eliminated a source of relatively well-paying, secure jobs for blacks. Joblessness increased among urban blacks, reducing the pool of marriageable men and undermining the strength of the family. Poverty increased as the number of female-headed households grew.

At the same time, new opportunities for middle-class blacks were generated by the expansion of civil rights. But the movement of the middle class out of the ghettos left "behind an isolated and very poor community without the institutions, resources and values necessary for success in modern society."[2]

This interpretation of the origins of urban poverty drew attention away from racial discrimination as the major barrier to the progress of African Americans and toward the effects of broad economic, demographic, and social welfare trends. But recent studies provide new evidence that racial discrimination continues to undermine the progress of blacks.

Assessing the well-being of blacks is more difficult now than in the past. Only a few generations ago, 90 percent of African Americans lived in poverty and racial inequities seemed obvious. Today, the root of the disparities between blacks and whites is harder to discern. Is racism dying, or is it still the primary reason for black underachievement? Why are some blacks moving into the middle and upper classes while others remain in poverty? There is no consensus about the answers to these complex questions. We can, however, sketch a portrait of African Americans in the 1990s using demographic and socioeconomic data, and shed some light on these complex relationships.

## Population Size and Growth

The 1990 Census counted 29,986,060 African Americans in the population, nearly 3.5 million more than in 1980 (see Box 1). Blacks represented 12.1 percent of the estimated 248.7 million Americans, up from 11.7 percent in 1980. The percentage of African Americans in the U.S. population in 1990 was the largest since 1880, when blacks accounted for 13.1 percent of the population.[3]

During the 1980s, the African-American population grew by 13 percent—more than double the growth of the white population (6 percent), but far below the increase for Asians or Hispanics (see Table 1). The number of non-Hispanic whites grew by only 4 percent over the decade. The number of blacks grew at an even faster rate in the 1970s (17 percent), compared with 12 percent for the total population and 6 percent for whites. According to Census Bureau projections, the proportion of blacks in the population should

*Box 1*

## Counting the African-American Population

The 1990 Census counted 29,986,060 African Americans in the United States as of April 1 of that year. But that number was nearly 2 million short of the actual number of U.S. blacks on that date, according to Census Bureau estimates. About 5.7 percent of the African-American population was missed by the census, a much greater percentage than the 1.3 percent undercount estimated for the non-black population. And, while census-taking has become ever more sophisticated, the 1990 Census missed more blacks than the previous census. The 1980 Census had an estimated undercount of 4.5 percent for blacks and 0.8 percent for non-blacks.[1]

African Americans are among the population groups most difficult to count in a census. They are more likely than other Americans to live in poor urban neighborhoods, which are difficult to enumerate. Also, some inner-city blacks harbor strong antigovernment feelings and do not want to cooperate with census-takers. Black men are especially subject to undercount: in 1990, 3.5 percent of black males, compared with only 2.0 percent of non-black males, were missed by the census.[2]

Why is this important? Census results help determine political representation and the distribution of federal and state funds. An inaccurate census, particularly one in which blacks (and other minorities) are disproportionately undercounted, means that states and localities with large minority populations do not get the political and economic clout to which they are entitled. Several civil rights groups, municipal officials, and even some members of Congress have called for the Census Bureau to adjust the 1990 census figures to correct for the undercount; some are threatening legal action. The use of the Post-Enumeration Survey (PES)—a Census Bureau survey that measures the accuracy of the census—to adjust the census, in fact, resulted from a lawsuit brought by the City of New York and several other plaintiffs in 1988.

As this *Bulletin* goes to press, Commerce Secretary Robert Mosbacher has not made a final decision on whether to adjust the 1990 Census. He has until July 15, 1991, to decide. Although every U.S. census has missed some percentage of the population, none has ever been adjusted for an undercount. Furthermore, the relatively small sample size of the PES (165,000 households nationwide) may compromise its practicality as a means for adjusting figures at the local level. Regardless of Mosbacher's decision, however, analysts predict that the Supreme Court will ultimately settle the undercount issue later in the decade.

In this paper, we use the data available at press time from the 1990 Census—as well as from other Census Bureau studies like the Current Population Survey (CPS)—to assess demographic and socioeconomic changes in the African-American population since 1980.

**References**


1. Bureau of the Census news release CB91-222, 13 June 1991, tables 1 and 3.
2. *Ibid.*, table 1.


continue to increase into the next century and may exceed 15 percent by 2040.[4]

Why is the number of blacks growing faster than the general population? The main reason is that blacks have higher birth rates than whites, who make up 80 percent of the U.S. total. In 1989, for example, the Census Bureau estimated a birth

*Table 1*

**The U.S. Population by Racial and Ethnic Group, 1970–1990**

(population in thousands)

| | April 1 1970 | April 1 1980 | April 1 1990 | Percent change 1970–1980 | Percent change 1980–1990 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| All races | 203,212 | 226,546 | 248,710 | 11.5 | 9.8 |
| Black | 22,580 | 26,495 | 29,986 | 17.3 | 13.2 |
| White | 177,749 | 188,372 | 199,686 | 6.0 | 6.0 |
| Other races[a] | 2,883 | 11,679 | 19,038 | 305.1 | 63.0 |
| Hispanic origin[b] | 9,073 | 14,609 | 22,354 | 61.0 | 53.0 |

a. Includes Native Americans, Asians and Pacific Islanders, and persons listing their race as "Other."
b. Persons of Hispanic origin may be of any race.

Source: Bureau of the Census. Published population census results for 1970 and 1980 and preliminary census figures for 1990.

rate of 22.1 births per 1,000 persons for African Americans, compared with 14.8 for whites. In contrast, the death rate and net immigration rate—the other two components of population change—are lower for blacks than for the general population. The overall death rate is lower for blacks because they have a younger age structure; a smaller percentage of blacks is in the oldest age groups most at risk of dying. In 1989, the death rate for African Americans was 8.3 deaths per 1,000 persons, compared with 8.9 per 1,000 for white Americans. The immigration of blacks from abroad is minimal compared with the large numbers of immigrants from Latin America and Asia. Immigration accounted for nearly 30 percent of total U.S. population growth during the 1980s, but only about 15 percent of the increase in the black population.[5]

From the end of the slave trade until the Immigration Act of 1965, the immigration of Africans or other blacks to the United States was largely nonexistent. Since 1965, immigration from predominately black countries in Africa and the Caribbean has increased steadily. The Immigration and Naturalization Service reports that, between 1981 and 1989, 144,000 persons immigrated to the United States from Africa and 414,000 entered from Haiti, Jamaica, Trinidad, and other predominately black Caribbean islands. This is 10 times the number entering from Africa, and 12 times the number coming from the Caribbean between 1951 and 1960. Still, Africa and the Caribbean combined account for only 9.6 percent of the 5.8 million legal immigrants to this country during the 1980s. By contrast, new arrivals from Asia and the rest of Latin America composed 42 and 35 percent, respectively, of legal immigrants during the 1980s.[6] Blacks who migrated here from Africa and the Caribbean often form a select group. They tend to be more educated and better-off economically than blacks born in this country. Many hold very different, often more conservative, views on social issues than do native-born blacks.

While Census Bureau projections show the African-American share of the U.S. population continuing to increase well into the 21st century, they also show the proportion of other minority groups increasing even faster. During the 1980s, the number of Hispanics and Asian Americans grew at rates dwarfing the black growth rate, primarily because of immigration. The U.S. Hispanic

population swelled by 53 percent, and the Asian population by 108 percent, over that decade, compared with a 13 percent growth rate for blacks. At these rates, Hispanics—who have higher fertility than blacks—will replace African Americans as the country's most numerous minority early in the 21st century. Blacks already account for less than half the U.S. minority population, according to 1990 Census results.

## Where Blacks Live

At the beginning of the 20th century, over 90 percent of U.S. blacks lived in the South, a legacy of their history as slaves on southern farms and plantations. Before that time, there was little truly voluntary migration of blacks into other states or regions. But when the supply of immigrant labor from Europe was disrupted by World War I, the unmet demand for workers, along with economic difficulties in the South, initiated a massive movement of blacks out of the rural South to northern industrial cities. For each decade between 1910 and 1970, there was a net out-migration of at least 300,000 blacks from the South; in each of the three decades between 1940 and 1970, the net African-American exodus numbered *over 1 million*. By 1970, the percentage of African Americans living in the South had dropped to 53 percent.[7]

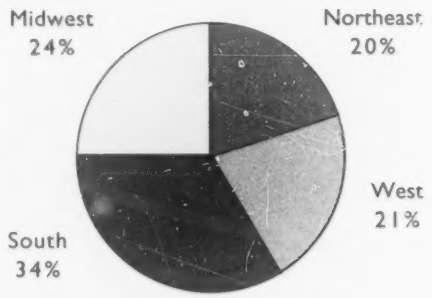
The Northeast and the Midwest were the chief beneficiaries of this black exodus from the South, although the West experienced significant black in-migration after 1940. Better economic opportunities in northern and western cities, along with the oppressive social conditions in the South, kept the stream of migrants flowing. By 1970, 19 percent of blacks lived in the Northeast, 20 percent in the Midwest, and 8 percent in the West.

Migration patterns of African Americans began to shift in the 1970s. Blacks, along with other Americans, left the declining cities of the Northeast and Midwest, and both regions experienced a net *out*-migration of African Americans for the first time. At the same time, a slow trickle of blacks began to flow back to the South. Although the West was the favored destination, the South experienced a net in-migration of 14,000 blacks between 1970 and 1975. The mass exodus of blacks from the South had halted.

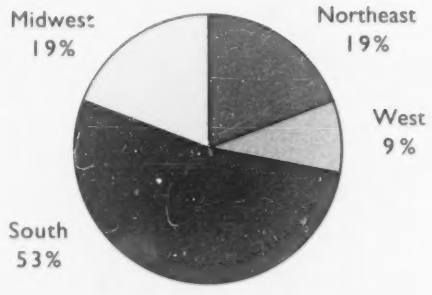
After 1975 a southern resurgence began, as continued economic opportunities, especially in the booming Sunbelt cities, made the South a particularly attractive destination for blacks. From 1975 until 1990, the net increase of blacks moving South exceeded that for any other region. The total number of African Americans moving between

*Figure 1*
**Total U.S. and African-American Population by Region, 1990**

*Total United States*




*African-American*




Source: Bureau of the Census, 1990 Census data.

regions has been relatively low, however, and the regional distribution of the black population in 1990 (see Figure 1) is about the same as it was in 1970.

In 1990, 16 states had African-American populations of over 1 million, led by New York, California, Texas, and Florida—the 4 most populous states. Indeed, the list includes the 12 most populous states. The remaining four—Maryland, Alabama, Louisiana, and South Carolina—are southern states in which one of every five residents is black. In contrast, 19 states are home to less than 100,000 blacks; most of these are largely rural states in the West, the Great Plains, or New England.[8]

## Preference for Metropolitan Areas

Since World War II, most African Americans have lived in urban areas, and today the overwhelming majority live in large metropolitan areas. During the 1980s, the number of blacks living in metropolitan areas increased at an average annual rate of 1.7 percent, just above the rate for whites, while the number living in nonmetropolitan areas edged downward. Much of the increase resulted from shifts in metropolitan boundaries—usually through the addition of counties to a metropolitan area. In 1990, the percentage of blacks living in metropolitan areas stood at 84 percent, compared with 76 percent for whites.

According to the 1990 Census, 31 cities have African-American populations of 100,000 or greater; 12 have at least 250,000 blacks. The black populations of the top 8 cities shown in Table 2—New York, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Houston, Baltimore, and Washington—would by themselves rank among the 50 largest cities in the country!

While the majority of both blacks and whites live in metropolitan areas, they tend to live in different communities (see Table 3). One-half of whites, compared with just over one-quarter of blacks, lived in suburban areas in 1990. Even so, blacks are more suburban now than in the past. In 1970, just 16 percent of blacks lived in suburban areas; in 1980, 23 percent lived in the suburbs.

The movement of black Americans to the suburbs began as a slow trickle in the 1960s, then widened into a stream during the 1970s. The black suburban population grew by 70 percent during the 1970s, fed primarily by an exodus from central cities. This trend has continued into the 1980s, as the number of black suburbanites swelled from 5.4 million to 8.2 million. Between 1986 and 1990, 73 percent of black population growth occurred in the suburbs.

While suburbanization generally conjures up pictures of a comfortable middle-class lifestyle, it is not yet clear whether this reflects the reality of black suburbanization of the 1970s

*Table 2*

**U.S. Cities with Black Populations of 150,000 or Greater, 1990**

| Black rank | Overall rank | City, state | Total population (in thousands) | Black population (in thousands) | Percent black |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 1 | New York, NY | 7,322.6 | 2,102.5 | 29 |
| 2 | 3 | Chicago, IL | 2,783.7 | 1,087.7 | 39 |
| 3 | 7 | Detroit, MI | 1,028.0 | 777.9 | 76 |
| 4 | 5 | Philadelphia, PA | 1,585.6 | 631.9 | 40 |
| 5 | 2 | Los Angeles,CA | 3,485.4 | 487.7 | 14 |
| 6 | 4 | Houston, TX | 1,630.6 | 458.0 | 28 |
| 7 | 13 | Baltimore, MD | 736.0 | 435.8 | 59 |
| 8 | 19 | Washington, DC | 606.9 | 399.6 | 66 |
| 9 | 18 | Memphis, TN | 610.3 | 334.7 | 55 |
| 10 | 25 | New Orleans, LA | 496.9 | 307.7 | 62 |
| 11 | 8 | Dallas, TX | 1,006.9 | 297.0 | 30 |
| 12 | 36 | Atlanta, GA | 394.0 | 264.3 | 67 |
| 13 | 24 | Cleveland, OH | 505.6 | 235.4 | 47 |
| 14 | 17 | Milwaukee, WI | 628.1 | 191.3 | 31 |
| 15 | 34 | St. Louis, MO | 396.7 | 188.4 | 48 |
| 16 | 60 | Birmingham, AL | 266.0 | 168.3 | 63 |
| 17 | 12 | Indianapolis, IN | 742.0 | 165.6 | 22 |
| 18 | 15 | Jacksonville, FL | 673.0 | 163.9 | 24 |
| 19 | 39 | Oakland, CA | 372.2 | 163.3 | 44 |
| 20 | 56 | Newark, NJ | 275.2 | 160.9 | 59 |

Source: Bureau of the Census, 1991. Unpublished data from 1990 Census.

*Table 3*

**Total U.S., Black, and White Populations by Metropolitan Residence, 1970-1990**

| | 1970 | | | 1980 | | | 1990[a] | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Total | Blacks | Whites | Total | Blacks | Whites | Total | Blacks | Whites |
| Total number (in thousands) | 203,212 | 22,581 | 177,749 | 226,546 | 26,495 | 188,372 | 245,992 | 30,332 | 206,853 |
| Percent | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| Metropolitan areas | 68.6 | 74.3 | 67.8 | 74.8 | 81.1 | 73.3 | 77.7 | 83.7 | 76.4 |
| Central cities | 31.4 | 58.2 | 27.8 | 29.9 | 57.7 | 24.9 | 30.5 | 56.7 | 26.2 |
| Suburbs | 37.2 | 16.1 | 40.0 | 44.8 | 23.3 | 48.4 | 47.2 | 27.0 | 50.2 |
| Nonmetropolitan areas | 31.4 | 25.7 | 32.2 | 25.2 | 18.9 | 26.7 | 22.3 | 16.3 | 23.6 |

Note: Metropolitan-nonmetropolitan area classifications are as of date in question.
a. Civilian, noninstitutional population as of March 1990.

Sources: 1970—Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population 1970* PC (1)-B1, United States Summary (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1972), table 48; 1980—Bureau of the Census, *1980 Census of Population* Part B, PC 80-1-B1, Part 1, United States Summary (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1983), table 38; 1990—Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports* P-60, no. 168 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1990), table 22.

and 1980s. In some metropolitan areas, low-income black ghettos simply expanded across city boundaries. In other areas, suburbanization reflected genuine upward mobility among African Americans.

## Residential Segregation

Within cities and suburbs, blacks and whites typically live in different neighborhoods, regardless of their income levels or poverty status. African Americans remain the most residentially isolated U.S. minority group. Hispanics and Asians are much more likely to live near each other or non-Hispanic whites than are blacks.

The level of racial and ethnic segregation of neighborhoods can be measured by various means. Probably the most well-known is the index of dissimilarity, which measures the degree to which groups are distributed evenly among city neighborhoods, typically census tracts or blocks. An index score of zero reflects no segregation (or complete integration), while an index score of one indicates complete residential segregation of groups. In a study of residential patterns in 60 metropolitan areas, the index of dissimilarity between blacks and non-Hispanic whites fell from 0.8 to 0.7 between 1970 and 1980, signalling a decline in the degree of residential segregation for blacks. But blacks remained more isolated than other U.S. ethnic or racial groups. In 1980, the index of dissimilarity was 0.4 between Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites and 0.3 between Asians and non-Hispanic whites.[9] And, there was little, if any, reduction in residential segregation of blacks during the 1980s, according to a preliminary analysis of 1990 census tract data.[10]

### High-Poverty Areas

The movement of African Americans to the suburbs was counterbalanced by a growing concentration of blacks in high-poverty areas over the past decade. Between 1980 and 1990, the number of blacks living in high-poverty areas (defined as census tracts with at least 20 percent of the residents in poverty) jumped by 19 percent, while the black population as a whole grew by 13 percent. Among blacks living in central cities, there was a 49 percent increase in the number of blacks in high-poverty areas.[11] Many analysts point to this increase in the number of blacks in high poverty areas—neighborhoods associated with high rates of crime, teenage pregnancy, and other social ills—as evidence of the rising "underclass" in our major cities.[12]

# Young Age Structure

The African-American population is younger than the U.S. population as a whole. The median age of blacks was 27.7 years in 1989, nearly five years younger than the median for all Americans. But, like the total population, the African-American population is aging. Between 1980 and 1989, the share of blacks age 65 and older increased from 7.8 to 8.3 percent, and the median age rose by nearly three years. Among the total U.S. population, the percentage in this elderly group rose from 11.3 to 12.5 percent, and the median age reached 32.6 years in 1989, up from 30 years of age in 1980.

The aging of the baby-boom generation (persons born between 1946 and 1964) contributed to the rise in the median age of African Americans, as it has for the total U.S. population. During the 1980s, the giant generation of baby boomers reached ages 25 to 44, the prime years for family formation. The number of blacks in that age group increased by 2.6 million people, or by 37.2 percent, in the past decade—the largest percentage change of any age group (see Table 4).

Blacks in some age groups are declining, while they are increasing in others. For example, the number of black school children fell during the 1970s, as the baby bust generation (born from the late-1960s to the mid-1970s) entered school. It increased again in the 1980s as the children of the baby boomers began to enter school. White baby boomers started their families later than blacks, however, and the number of school-age white children continued to fall (by 7.3 percent) during the 1980s. As a result, blacks have gained a larger share of the student enrollment. The number of blacks under age five increased 18 percent during the 1980s, while the number of white preschoolers grew by 12 percent. Consequently, the black share of U.S. school enrollment is likely to continue to increase relative to whites during the 1990s.

The younger age structure of the black population creates a momentum for future growth because a larger proportion of blacks than whites are in their childbearing ages.

*Table 4*

**Age Distribution of the Total U.S., Black, and White Populations, 1989**

(numbers in thousands)

| | Total | | Blacks | | Whites | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1989 | Percent change 1980-1989 | 1989 | Percent change 1980-1989 | 1989 | Percent change 1980-1989 |
| Total | 248,762 | 9.6 | 30,788 | 14.9 | 209,326 | 7.3 |
| Age group | | | | | | |
| 0-4 (preschool) | 18,752 | 14.7 | 2,890 | 17.5 | 15,050 | 12.2 |
| 5-17 (school age) | 45,331 | –4.4 | 7,104 | 1.4 | 36,324 | –7.3 |
| 18-24 (young adults) | 26,564 | –12.3 | 3,839 | –4.5 | 21,735 | –15.0 |
| 25-44 (young families) | 80,632 | 28.1 | 9,632 | 37.2 | 68,049 | 25.5 |
| 45-64 (older families) | 46,498 | 4.5 | 4,770 | 13.5 | 40,347 | 2.1 |
| 65+ (elderly) | 30,984 | 21.3 | 2,555 | 22.1 | 27,822 | 20.1 |
| Median age | 33 | | 28 | | 34 | |

Source: 1980—Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports* P-25, no. 1045 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1990), table 1; 1989—Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports* P-25, no. 1057 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1990), table 1.

This momentum will insure that African Americans will continue to grow at a faster rate than whites well into the 21st century, even if fertility, mortality, and migration rates become equal for both groups.

## Fertility

Black Americans have had higher fertility than white Americans for the past two centuries. At the height of the baby boom in the mid-1950s, blacks were having an average of 4.4 children per woman, compared with 3.6 among whites. Because of their higher birth rates and younger age structure, a disproportionately high share of U.S. births are black. In 1988, the National Center for Health Statistics registered 671,976 African-American births—17 percent of all births that year.[13] The total fertility rate (TFR), or total number of lifetime births per woman, has remained higher for blacks. The TFR, which provides a good barometer of fertility independent of age structure, was 32 percent higher for blacks than for whites in 1988—2.4 children per woman compared with 1.8 per woman for whites.

There has been remarkable stability in the ratio of black to white fertility rates since 1960: the TFR for blacks has remained one-quarter to one-third higher than the TFR for whites. Fertility levels for blacks and whites fell in tandem during the 1960s and 1970s and have fluctuated similarly during the 1980s. The TFRs for both groups have risen slightly in recent years.[14]

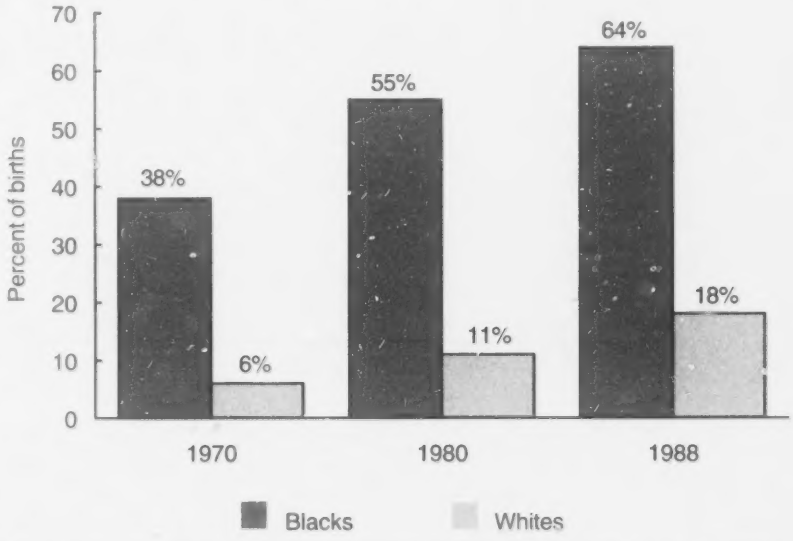
Socioeconomic differences between blacks and whites explain much of the difference in their fertility levels. Birth rates are similar among black and white women with the same level of educational attainment, for example. In 1988, the completed fertility rate of black women age 35 to 44 with some college education was only 4 percent higher than that of their white counterparts. The black rate was 11 percent higher among women with less than a college education.[15] And among low-income families in 1985, white women were more likely to have had a child in the previous year than were black women.[16]

Regardless of the reasons, black fertility remains slightly higher than white fertility. In addition, two glaring disparities in the childbearing patterns of blacks and whites are cause for concern: compared with whites, black babies are nearly four times more likely to be born to a single mother, and three times more likely to be born to a young teenage mother.

In 1988, 64 percent of black babies were born out-of-wedlock, compared with 18 percent of white babies. Birth rates for unmarried women have soared in the 1980s, as shown in Figure 2. In fact, the rates have increased faster among whites than blacks. Still, single black women of every age are more likely to have a child than single white women. The disparity is greatest among teenagers. In 1988, unmarried white teenagers age 15 to 17 bore 17 births per 1,000 girls, while unmarried black teenag-

*Figure 2*

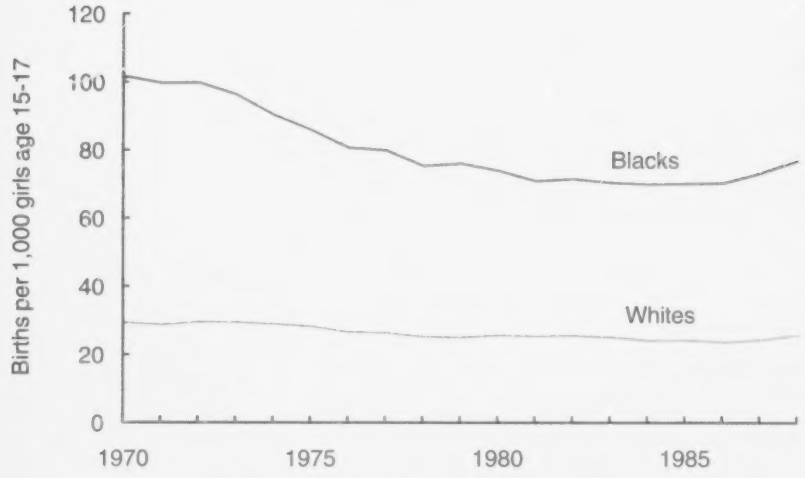
**Babies Born Out-of-Wedlock, by Race, 1970, 1980, and 1988**




Source: National Center for Health Statistics, *Monthly Vital Statistics Report* 39, no. 4, supplement (1990), table 18; and *Vital Statistics of the United States 1987* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1989), table 1-31.

*Figure 3*

**Fertility Rates for Black and White Girls Age 15-17, 1970-1988**




Source: National Center for Health Statistics, *Monthly Vital Statistics Report* 39, no.4.

*Table 5*

**Life Expectancy at Birth for Blacks and Whites, 1970-1988**

| | Blacks | Whites | Difference in years |
|---|---|---|---|
| Both sexes | | | |
| 1988 | 69.2 | 75.6 | 6.4 |
| 1985 | 69.5 | 75.3 | 5.8 |
| 1980 | 68.1 | 74.4 | 6.3 |
| 1975 | 66.8 | 73.4 | 6.6 |
| 1970 | 64.1 | 71.7 | 7.6 |
| Males | | | |
| 1988 | 64.9 | 72.3 | 7.4 |
| 1985 | 65.3 | 71.9 | 6.6 |
| 1980 | 63.8 | 70.7 | 6.9 |
| 1975 | 62.4 | 69.5 | 7.1 |
| 1970 | 60.0 | 68.0 | 8.0 |
| Females | | | |
| 1988 | 73.4 | 78.9 | 5.5 |
| 1985 | 73.5 | 78.7 | 5.2 |
| 1980 | 72.5 | 78.1 | 5.6 |
| 1975 | 71.3 | 77.3 | 6.0 |
| 1970 | 68.3 | 75.6 | 7.3 |

Source: National Center for Health Statistics, *Life Tables*, vol. 2 of *Vital Statistics of the United States 1988* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1991), table 6-5.

ers bore 74 births per 1,000.

Birth rates for all teenagers have fallen over the past two decades (see Figure 3). Between 1970 and 1985, the fertility rate for teenage black girls age 15 to 17, whether married or single, declined from 101 to 70 births per 1,000 girls; for white teenagers, the rate fell from 29 to 24. In the past several years, however, teenage fertility has edged upward. By 1988, birth rates had increased to 77 for black teenagers and to 26 for white teenagers. Throughout the 1980s, however, the gap between black and white teenage fertility remained fairly constant.

The disproportionately high rate of teen childbearing in the African-American community exacerbates many social problems. Health problems, high infant mortality, educational deficiencies, long-term welfare dependency, and poverty are among the consequences risked by teens who have babies. Teenage mothers are more likely to be unmarried, and therefore without the potential income and support a husband could provide. Many analysts also fear that a "cycle" of teenage childbearing may continue into succeeding generations.[17]

# Mortality and Health

## Lower Life Expectancy

An African-American child born in 1988 can expect to live, on average, 69.2 years. This is six years less than the average for a white child born the same year—75.6 years (see Table 5). The racial gap in average life expectancy is lower than it was in 1970, when black life expectancy was eight years below that for whites. But the life expectancy for blacks has actually *declined* by 0.3 years since 1985, and the gap between whites and blacks has widened slightly.

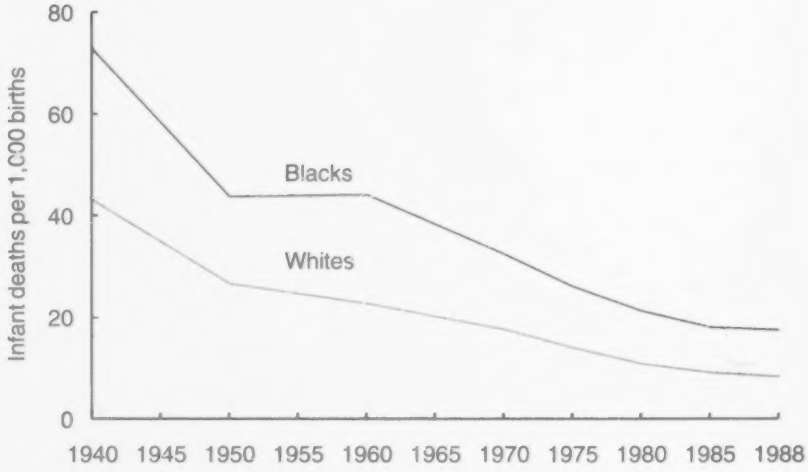
Average life expectancy for whites continued to improve in the 1980s, but after 1985, it stagnated for black women and actually dropped among black men. The 1988 overall life

expectancy for black males was 64.9 years, more than eight years short of that for black women (73.4 years), and seven years below that of white men (72.3).

Blacks die at higher rates than whites at every age below age 85. Most of the excess black mortality is attributed to higher black infant mortality plus higher rates of death from eight major causes: accidents, homicides, heart disease, stroke, liver disease, cancer, diabetes, and AIDS. In the late 1980s, homicide and AIDS death rates increased sharply for blacks, helping to reverse gains in life expectancy. Also, white Americans have been more successful than blacks in changing their diets and lifestyles to decrease the risk of heart disease. Death rates from heart disease have declined much faster for whites than for African Americans in the past decade, widening the gap between the races.

*Figure 4*

**Infant Mortality Rates by Race, 1940-1988**




Source: National Center for Health Statistics, *Monthly Vital Statistics Report* 39, no. 7, supplement (1990), table 13.

## High Rates of Infant Mortality

Black babies die at twice the rate of white babies in the United States. In 1988, the infant mortality rate (IMR) for blacks was 17.6 infant deaths per 1,000 live births, compared with 8.5 for whites. This discrepancy in infant mortality is one of the most disturbing differences between blacks and whites, perhaps because it demonstrates the persistent gaps in living standards and health care between these population groups.

Infant mortality has improved markedly for both black and white Americans, but the rate has fallen further for white babies (see Figure 4). In 1940, the IMR was 72.9 for blacks and 43.2 for whites. By 1988, the IMR for blacks was only one-fourth the 1940 figure; for whites it had fallen to one-fifth. Although both groups enjoyed dramatic improvements, the ratio of black to white infant mortality has increased slightly, from 1.7 in 1940 to 2.0 in 1980 and 2.1 in 1988.

In several of our largest cities, the infant mortality figures paint an especially bleak portrait for black Americans. More than 20 African-American babies died for every 1,000 born in 1987 in Washington, D.C., Chicago, Detroit, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Indianapolis, and Los Angeles, among other cities.[18] These rates rival those of some less developed countries: South Korea's IMR was about 25 deaths per 1,000 births in 1988; Chile's was 19 deaths per 1,000.[19]

One of the reasons for the high infant mortality among African Americans is the greater probability that black infants will weigh too little at birth. Black women are nearly three times as likely as whites to give birth to low-weight babies (weighing under 2,500 grams or 5.5 pounds).[20] Low birth weight babies are at a high risk of dying within the first year or of developing serious health problems. Low birth weight is related to the health and lifestyle of the mother, especially while she is pregnant. Smoking, poor nutrition, and a lack of prenatal care all contribute to having an underweight baby. Teenage mothers, especially those having a second or third baby, unmarried women, and less educated women are

also at a higher risk. Black women fare worse than whites on nearly all these as well as the other major risk factors associated with having a low birth weight baby.[21]

## Major Causes of Death

Blacks are more likely than whites to die from 13 of the 15 major causes of death (see Table 6). Heart disease and cancer are the leading causes of death for both blacks and whites. African Americans are 1.4 times more likely than whites to die from heart disease and 1.3 times more likely to die from cancer. Diabetes also ranks as a major cause of death for whites, but blacks are twice as likely to die from this disease as are whites. In 1988, diabetes ranked as the fourth leading cause of death for African-American women, and the tenth leading cause for African-American men.

The most striking mortality difference between blacks and whites is for homicide. The homicide death rate is six times higher for blacks than for whites, with black men especially vulnerable. The chances of a black man being murdered are 4 times higher than for a black woman, 7 times higher than for a white man, and 20 times higher than for a white woman. Homicide is the leading cause of death for young black men. In 1988, nearly 5,000 African-American men 15 to 29 years old were murdered. For whites, Asians and other races, accidents, primarily automobile-related, are the major cause of death among young men.

Homicide rates tend to fluctuate over time, apparently governed by a complex set of social, economic, and demographic factors. Young men of all races are at greatest risk of homicide, thus the young age structure of African Americans accounts for some of the higher homicide rates among blacks. But most of the difference stems from more chronic social and economic problems. Alcohol and drug abuse—more prevalent among blacks—is involved in a majority of homicide deaths. Between 10 and 20 percent of homicides are related to illicit drug traffic alone. Access to handguns and other firearms, used in 82 percent of the homicides of blacks age 15 to 34, has increased. Social proscriptions against murder appear to have weakened among certain groups of American youths.[22] All these factors have led to a growing tendency to use violence to settle disputes, and to rising homicide rates.

*Table 6*

**Ratio of Black to White Death Rates for the 15 Major Causes of Death, 1988**

| Cause of death | Black-to-white ratio | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Both sexes | Males | Females |
| Heart disease | 1.4 | 1.3 | 1.6 |
| Cancer | 1.3 | 1.4 | 1.2 |
| Stroke | 1.9 | 1.9 | 1.8 |
| Accidents | 1.3 | 1.4 | 1.2 |
| Chronic lung disease | 0.8 | 0.9 | 0.7 |
| Pneumonia, flu | 1.4 | 1.6 | 1.3 |
| Diabetes | 2.4 | 2.1 | 2.6 |
| Suicide | 0.6 | 0.6 | 0.5 |
| Cirrhosis, chronic liver disease | 1.7 | 1.7 | 1.9 |
| Kidney diseases | 2.8 | 2.6 | 3.1 |
| Atherosclerosis | 1.1 | 1.2 | 1.1 |
| Homicide | 6.4 | 7.6 | 4.5 |
| Septicemia | 2.6 | 2.7 | 2.6 |
| Conditions of newborns | 2.7 | 3.1 | 3.2 |
| AIDS | 3.4 | 3.2 | 8.9 |

Source: National Center for Health Statistics, *Monthly Vital Statistics Report* 39, no. 7, supplement (1990); and unpublished data.

## Deaths from AIDS

After homicide, AIDS accounts for the largest racial difference in death rates among the 15 major causes of death. The death rate from AIDS is three times higher for blacks than for whites. The prevalence of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), which causes AIDS, is expected to spread faster among blacks in the future (see Box 2). In 1989 alone, African Americans accounted for nearly a third of all new AIDS cases and deaths. Moreover, non-Hispanic

*Box 2*

## AIDS and the African-American Community

The epidemic of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) has hit the African-American community hard, with its full impact yet to be felt. AIDS is the final stage of a chronic disease caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), which severely weakens an individual's immune system, leaving that person vulnerable to a variety of infections. By September 1990, 148,000 U.S. residents had been diagnosed with AIDS; of those, 91,000 had died. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control projects that the cumulative number of AIDS cases will likely range between 390,000 and 480,000 by the end of 1993.

As with so many other health problems, blacks suffer disproportionately from AIDS. While there are more AIDS cases among white gay or bisexual men than among any other single group, the deadly virus spread rapidly among blacks during the late-1980s. Between 1987 and 1989, the number of new AIDS cases among blacks shot up 59 percent, while the number increased 38 percent among white gay or bisexual men. Consequently, the African-American share of AIDS victims is growing. Only 12 percent of the total population, blacks accounted for 31 percent of all new AIDS cases in 1989, up from 25 percent in 1985.[1]

The AIDS virus can be spread through direct blood contamination (often through intravenous drug use), unprotected sexual intercourse, and viral passage from a mother to her unborn fetus. Roughly half of all AIDS cases among African Americans—52 percent in 1989 alone—resulted directly or indirectly from intravenous drug use.[2] High rates of intravenous drug use, lower educational levels, and reduced access to medical care all favor the continued transmission of HIV among poor blacks.

With no vaccine or cure likely before 2000, education about AIDS—in clear, explicit terms—remains the best means of curbing the spread of the deadly HIV.[3] Indeed, the impressive slowdown in AIDS transmission among gay and bisexual men resulted from such educational efforts.

Recent surveys show that Americans are becoming more knowledgeable about HIV infection. Moreover, there have been efforts by the African-American community to respond to the challenge AIDS provides. For example, the School of Medicine at Morehouse College in Atlanta manages a health program that includes AIDS education for minority communities in 15 eastern states. Community organizations, government agencies, private foundations, and individuals have tried similar efforts.[4]

Yet some population groups devastated by AIDS are difficult to reach through education alone. Intravenous drug users—who often live outside mainstream society—are a prime example. Many researchers feel that checking the spread of AIDS among African Americans must involve eradication of the social and economic conditions leading to drug abuse—unemployment, crime, homelessness, and school truancy.[5]

### References


1. National Center for Health Statistics, *Health: United States 1990* (Hyattsville, MD: Public Health Service, 1991), tables 44-47.
2. *Ibid.*, table 46.
3. William L. Heyward and James W. Curran, "The Epidemiology of AIDS in the U.S.," *Scientific American* 259 (October 1988): 72-81.
4. Harvey V. Fineberg, "The Social Dimensions of AIDS," *Scientific American* 259 (October 1988): 128-134.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 128-134; and Robert C. Gallo and Luc Montagnier, "AIDS in 1988," *Scientific American* 259 (October 1988): 41-48.

blacks accounted for a *majority* of that year's AIDS-related deaths among children under age 13 and women.[23]

### Chronic Health Problems

African Americans are more likely to suffer from chronic health problems than whites or other Americans. Such maladies are often caused by the degenerative diseases that claim most American lives, and they exact a high economic price for the families of individuals disabled by these ailments. Low-income persons suffer the greatest economic costs because they are least likely to have good insurance or pension plans. Blacks' low socio-economic status, in fact, accounts for their higher incidence of long-term disability.[24]

### Why Differentials Persist

Why do African Americans have higher mortality rates and more chronic health problems than whites? Factors relating to lifestyle and health care use may be among the most important reasons.

Specific lifestyle traits have been linked to the prevalence (or absence) of particular diseases. For the last quarter century, for example, the U.S. Surgeon General's office has linked smoking with lung cancer and heart disease. Medical experts have also linked obesity with circulatory disease, diabetes, and hypertension (high blood pressure); hypertension, in turn, with strokes and heart disease; and low birth weight with infant mortality. African Americans fare worse than whites on all these factors. A higher percentage of black than white men smoke (43 compared with 35 percent in 1983). Blacks are also more likely to be obese, especially at older ages, and to suffer from hypertension.[25] African Americans are also less likely than whites to visit a doctor.[26]

Socioeconomic differences provide yet another explanation. Information about the importance of regular medical checkups and early diagnosis and treatment of disease are not as likely to reach poorly educated individuals. Even when such information does reach them, they often have limited access to quality medical care. One telling example of this problem is the lack of health-care coverage--by private insurance, Medicare, or Medicaid. In 1989, 16 percent of all Americans under age 65 had no health insurance; the figure was 22 percent for African Americans under age 65 and 34 percent for black adults age 18 to 24.[27]

## African-American Families

No change in the black community has been more dramatic or more fundamental than the re-ordering of families and family relationships. In recent years, these changes have prompted many observers to proclaim a crisis in the black family, generally characterized by the growing numbers of poor, female-headed families.

While the vast majority of the 10 million African-American households are family households (that is, the household members are related by birth, marriage, or adoption), only about half the families were headed by a married couple in 1990, down from 68 percent in 1970 and 56 percent in 1980. A much higher percentage (83 percent) of white families are headed by married-couples, although this percentage also has slipped over the past two decades.[28]

African-American households are larger than white households, but are slightly smaller than Hispanic households. The average black household contained 2.9 persons in 1990, compared with 2.6 persons for all whites and 3.5 persons for Hispanics. Both African-American and Hispanic female-headed households have one more person, on average, than households headed by white females. Black households also are more likely than white to include

adults in addition to a married couple or household head. In 1990, about a third of all black households included other adults, compared with only a fourth of white households.[29]

## Changing Marriage Patterns

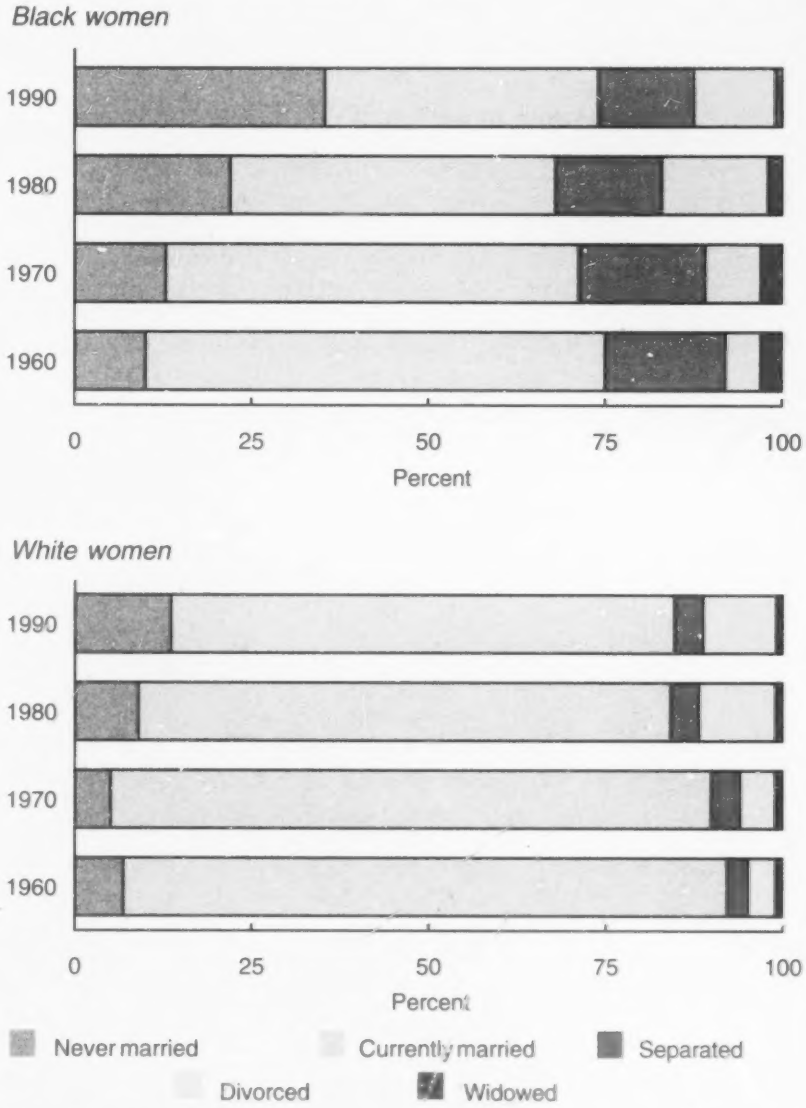
Marriage and divorce statistics since the 1960s record major shifts in the African-American family. In 1960, 65 percent of black women age 30 to 34 were in an intact marriage. In 1990, only 39 percent were married and living with their husbands. Over the same period, the percentage divorced grew from 8 to 12 percent, and the percentage who had never married grew from 10 to 35 percent. While a similar movement away from marriage occurred among white women, the change was much more dramatic among blacks (see Figure 5).

Some analysts explain the decline in marriage among blacks in economic and demographic terms, while others cite more fundamental societal changes that have affected all Americans. The rising divorce rates and increase in the number of persons who choose not to marry may indicate that the institution of marriage itself is weakening. The marketplace and public institutions provide many of the goods and services that previously were the domain of the family. Low fertility rates have curtailed the number of years parents have dependent children living at home. The increased job opportunities for women make marriage less of an economic necessity, and, in the more tolerant climate of modern society, less of a social necessity for women. With a fourth of all children born to unmarried women, even childbearing is no longer confined to marriage. The movement away from marriage can also be seen as a consequence of modernization and urbanization, which has fostered individualism, weakening the family.[30]

Many social scientists focus on the relationship between marriage rates and the relative number of men and women. Women are more likely to marry when the ratio of men to women is high than when there is a relative shortage of men. The rapid rise in the number of births during the baby boom created a "marriage squeeze" in the 1970s and 1980s because there were more women than men in the marrying ages. This caused many young Americans to delay or forego marriage and childbearing.[31] This imbalance of the

*Figure 5*

**The Changing Marital Status of Black and White Women Age 30-34, 1960-1990**




Source: Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports* P-20, no. 450 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1991), table 1; and published data from the 1960, 1970, and 1980 Censuses.

sexes was more extreme for the black than for the white population. On average, the ratio of males to females at birth is lower among blacks than whites,* and black male mortality is relatively high in the young adult ages. Even allowing for an undercount of black men in the census, black women outnumber men in the ages when most people marry and start families, age 20 to 49. Following this reasoning, fewer black women are getting married because there are not enough eligible men available.

In addition to demographic and social factors, economic changes—which eliminated many jobs held by black men in central city areas—and racial discrimination in hiring and firing have pushed many black men to the margins, or completely out, of the labor force. The deteriorating economic position of black men has been blamed for further discouraging the formation of married-couple families. Black men, with low wages and little job security, have difficulty fulfilling the traditional role as the major breadwinner for a family. The rise in female-headed families, whether formed through divorce, separation, or out-of-wedlock childbearing, has been linked to the decline in the ratio of employed black men per black woman.

Several analysts claim that welfare programs designed to aid single-parent families were a disincentive for low-income blacks to marry, although statistical analysis has failed to find a strong association between welfare payment levels and family composition.[32]

Many analysts argue that the modern African-American family has always differed from European-American families and should not be expected to conform to the married-couple pattern. Modern black family structure can be viewed as a legacy of slavery, when marriage among blacks was not recognized legally. Slave families tended to be consanguineal (organized around blood relatives) rather than conjugal (built around a married couple). Some trace this family structure back to the social structure in the African countries from which the ancestors of American blacks came.[33]

There is an ongoing debate as to whether the retreat from marriage among black Americans resulted directly from the disruptive effects of

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*Among white Americans, nearly 106 male babies are born for every 100 female babies, on average. Among African Americans, 103 males are born for every 100 females. Male mortality is higher than female at every age, further depleting the number of African-American men relative to women. For the 20 to 49 age group, there are only 89 black men for every 100 black women.

slavery; whether it is only indirectly associated with slavery through the continuing economic marginalization of blacks; or whether black culture and social structure, emanating from African roots, lead to different marriage and family patterns. Recently, social scientists have focused on issues related to the social and economic marginalization of black men to explain the low marriage rates among African Americans.

Overwhelmingly, blacks still marry other blacks, despite opinion polls showing that interracial marriage has become socially acceptable to a growing percentage of Americans. The percentage of married African Americans whose spouse is not black has not changed over the past decade. In 1987, only 3 percent of married blacks had a non-black spouse. In contrast, about 16 percent of married Asians and Hispanics had a non-Asian or non-Hispanic spouse. When African Americans do marry a non-black, it is usually the wife who is white, Asian, or of another race.

## The Children

African-American children have been most affected by the changes in marital status and family composition that have occurred over the past few decades. The share of black children living with two parents declined from 58 percent in 1970 to 38 percent in 1990.[34] Just over half (55 percent) of black children lived in a single-parent household in 1990, 51 percent with their mother. In contrast, 19 percent of white children lived in single-parent households in 1989—a significant share, but minor compared with the statistic for blacks (see Table 7).

Black children are more likely to live with a grandparent than are white or Hispanic children. In 1990, 12 percent of black children lived in households that included their grandparents, compared with only 4 percent of whites and 6 percent of Hispanics.[35]

More than a fourth (27 percent) of all African-American children live with mothers who have never married. The percentage is highest among young children: 39 percent for children under age six.[36] One of the major consequences of living in a female-headed family is that such families generally have fewer economic resources than married-couple families. Nearly two-thirds are poor and live in central cities; over one-quarter live in public housing (see

*Table 7*

**Living Arrangements of Children under 18 by Race and Ethnic Group, 1990**

(numbers in thousands)

| | Blacks | | Whites | | Hispanics[a] | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Number | Percent | Number | Percent | Number | Percent |
| Total children | 10,018 | 100.0 | 51,390 | 100.0 | 7,174 | 100.0 |
| Living with | | | | | | |
| Two parents | 3,781 | 37.7 | 40,593 | 79.0 | 4,789 | 66.8 |
| One parent | 5,485 | 54.8 | 9,870 | 19.2 | 2,154 | 30.0 |
| Mother only | 5,132 | 51.2 | 8,321 | 16.2 | 1,943 | 27.1 |
| Father only | 353 | 3.5 | 1,549 | 3.0 | 211 | 2.9 |
| Other relative[b] | 654 | 6.5 | 708 | 1.4 | 177 | 2.5 |
| Non-relative | 98 | 1.0 | 220 | 0.4 | 54 | 0.8 |

a. Hispanics may be of any race

b. 463,000 black children and 452,000 white children lived with a grandparent with neither parent present.

Source: Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports* P-20, no. 447 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1990), table 4.

Table 8). The 3.8 million black children living in two-parent families appear privileged in comparison. Their parents are more educated, earn nearly four times as much money, and are more than twice as likely to own their own home. These stark differences highlight the two separate worlds inhabited by poor and middle-class black children, and suggest that the African-American population will become more polarized as these children mature.

## Education: Is Progress Slowing?

The education of black Americans has received enormous attention from policymakers, primarily because black students are more likely to make low grades and to drop out of school than are white students. Many claim that African-American children are not being prepared adequately for the future labor force.

A number of educational programs have been launched specifically to raise the achievement of poor and minority students. Concern about the relatively low ranking of U.S. students in international tests has sparked renewed interest in improving educational skills. Indeed, raising the academic performance of U.S. students has been deemed a high priority by the George Bush Administration and the National Governors Association. Policymakers recognize that they cannot afford to give up on these students.

This below-average academic performance is also of concern because black children make up about 16 percent of the nation's public-school students, and their share is increasing. They are a majority in many of the nation's largest school districts: roughly 90 percent in Atlanta, Detroit, and Washington, D.C., and nearly 40 percent in New York City. As these students reach working age, the African-American share of the future labor force will also expand.

Although the average academic performance of African-American children remains below that of whites, the educational levels of blacks have risen sharply over the past quarter century. In 1959, 26 percent of African Americans over age 65 could neither read nor write, compared with only 5 percent of whites in that age group.[37] In the 1990s, complete illiteracy is a rarity among native-born Americans of any race. The older generation of blacks, who grew up before schooling was widely available for them, is being replaced by adults who benefitted from the civil rights movement and from the expansion of the American public school system after World War II. The percentage of both black and white students completing high school increased steadily from the mid-1960s until the mid-1980s, then leveled off. In 1964 only 45 percent of young blacks age 25 to 29 had completed high school, compared with 72 percent of whites. By 1987, about 83 percent of young black adults, and 86 percent of young whites, had finished high school.[38]

Yet, African-American students remain more likely than whites to drop out of school, putting them at a disadvantage in the job market. In

*Table 8*

**Characteristics of Black Children and their Families, 1990**

| | Children living in | |
|---|---|---|
| | Two-parent households | Female-headed households |
| Median family income (1989) | $31,757 | $9,590 |
| Percent of children whose families: | | |
| Are headed by a high school graduate | 79.2 | 66.0 |
| Own their home | 55.3 | 22.3 |
| Live in central cities | 49.7 | 63.6 |
| Live in public housing | 6.3 | 29.8 |
| Have incomes below poverty | 18.1 | 61.1 |

Source: Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports* P-20, no. 450 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1991), table 6.

the high school sophomore class of 1980, 22 percent of the blacks failed to graduate with their class, compared with 15 percent of white students, 8 percent of Asians, and 28 percent of Hispanics.[39]

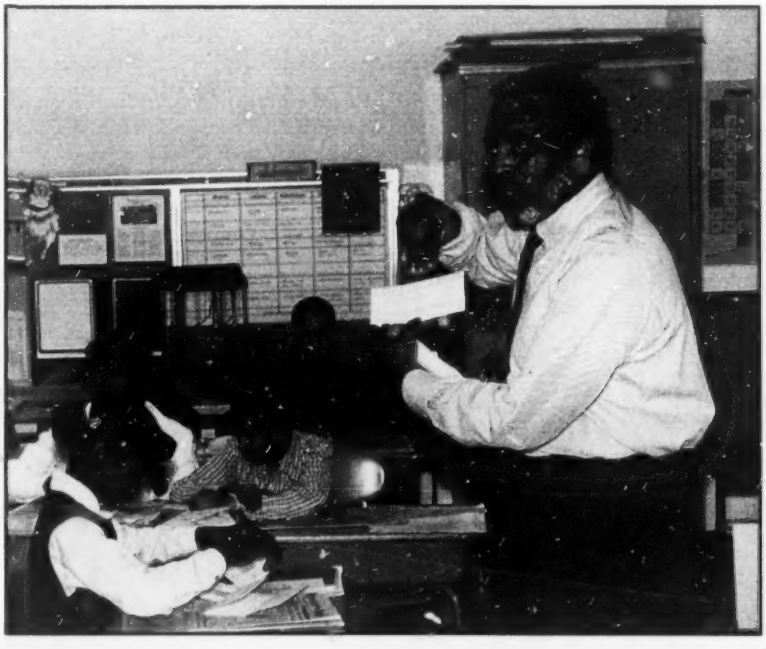
Many dropouts later return to school or earn a high school equivalency degree, but about 10 to 12 percent of Americans remain *status dropouts,* defined as persons 16 to 24 years of age who have not graduated from high school and are not currently enrolled in school. In 1989, 14 percent of non-Hispanic blacks remained status dropouts compared with only 9 percent of non-Hispanic whites. Hispanics, whose numbers include many recent immigrants, are even less likely than blacks to complete high school. About a third of Hispanics were status dropouts in 1989.

Students are more likely to drop out of school when they get poor grades, are older than their classmates, come from a single-parent family, have parents who dropped out of school, or live in a central city rather than a suburban or nonmetropolitan area. On average, black students fare worse than whites on almost all these, as well as other, risk factors associated with dropping out of school. When these family and background differences are taken into account, however, blacks are no more likely than whites to drop out of high school. Dropout rates for blacks and whites living in suburban areas were nearly equal.[40]

Strategies to solve the dropout problem among African Americans must address a wide array of social issues. The roots of the school problems for blacks are complex. They are linked to poverty, racism, and often cultural isolation. Blacks who do stay in school tend to earn lower grades, score below the national average on standardized tests, and are much more likely to be suspended or expelled because of discipline problems than are white students. On national tests administered in 1986, only 49 percent of African-American 13-year-olds had mastered basic problem solving in mathematics, compared with 80 percent of white students and 55 percent of Hispanics. There is also about a four-year gap in reading abilities among blacks and whites with the same number of years of education.[41]

National tests have recorded some gains in minority performance over the past two decades, but progress has been slow and uneven. Some educators complain that their efforts are overshadowed by socioeconomic factors outside school that discourage blacks from performing well. Many black children, especially those from low-income backgrounds, are behind academically before they enter kindergarten and they never catch up. Programs for preschoolers from low-income families, such as Head Start, have been successful in boosting academic performance, but they reach only a small percentage of needy students.

Early intervention programs for preschoolers are not the full solution. Some of the advantages gained from Head Start-type programs begin to disappear at the upper grades as



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social and community factors exert their influence. In certain schools, the prevailing social climate leads some good students to perform below their ability consciously, and discourages poor or average students from trying to improve.[42]

## College Enrollment

Another trend of the 1980s, particularly in the latter half of the decade, suggests that black educational attainment beyond high school may be on the decline: the percentage of blacks enrolling in and graduating from college began to slip. This decline in college attendance may be linked to cuts in student aid for minorities and the skyrocketing costs of college tuition.

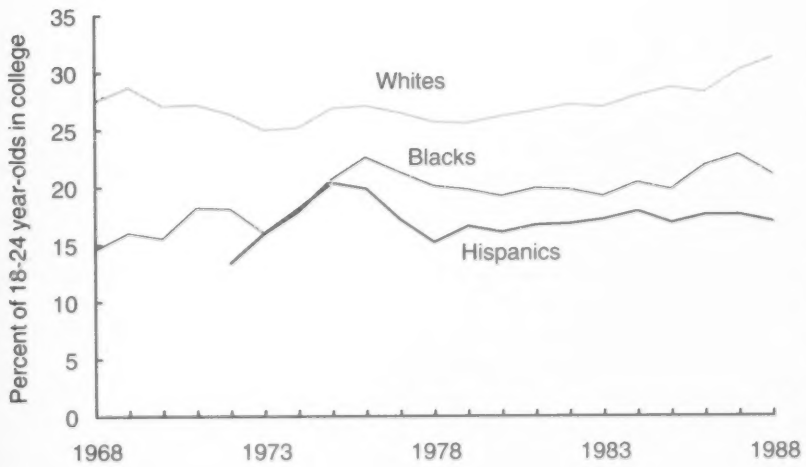
In the mid-1970s, 23 percent of black and 20 percent of Hispanic 18-to-24-year olds were enrolled in college, an all-time high for both groups. But since that time, the percentage of blacks in college has hovered around 20 percent and the percentage of Hispanics enrolled has been about 16 percent, while the college attendance among whites continued to expand (see Figure 6). In 1988, 21 percent of blacks and 17 percent of Hispanics were enrolled in college compared with 31 percent of whites. Over the decade, the gap in college attendance among young whites, blacks, and Hispanics has grown.

Black women now are more likely to attend college than black men. During the 1980s, the percentage of black women going on to college continued a modest increase while the percentage of black men in college declined. Among whites, the percentages in college also are slightly higher for women, however, the gap between the sexes is much smaller.

White students are twice as likely as blacks to graduate from college. About 20 percent of whites ultimately earn a degree, compared with 11 percent of blacks. Between 1977 and 1987, the number of blacks completing a bachelor's degree fell by 3 percent while the number of college-age blacks swelled by 31 percent. The racial differences were considerably greater for the more advanced master's or doctoral degrees. Such developments do not bode well for the entrance of more African Americans into the higher paying, higher status occupations.

One positive indicator of black educational progress should be noted: the number of blacks earning professional degrees in medicine and law shot up 35 percent between 1977 and 1987. The total number of professional degrees awarded to blacks remains fairly small, however. In 1987, nearly 3,500 professional degrees were awarded to African Americans, 883 more than in 1977. The share of all these degrees going to blacks changed little, from 4 to 5 percent, even though the dominance of whites fell from 92 to 89 percent. Other minorities--Hispanics, Asians, and American Indians—have managed to gain an even larger share of these high status degrees over the past decade.[43] In part this reflects the

*Figure 6*
**College Enrollment for Blacks, Whites, and Hispanics, 1968-1988**




Note: Hispanics may be of any race.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics 1990* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1991), table 170.

rapid growth of other minority groups during the 1980s, but it also signals a genuine slowdown in the educational advancement of blacks.

## Participation in the Labor Force

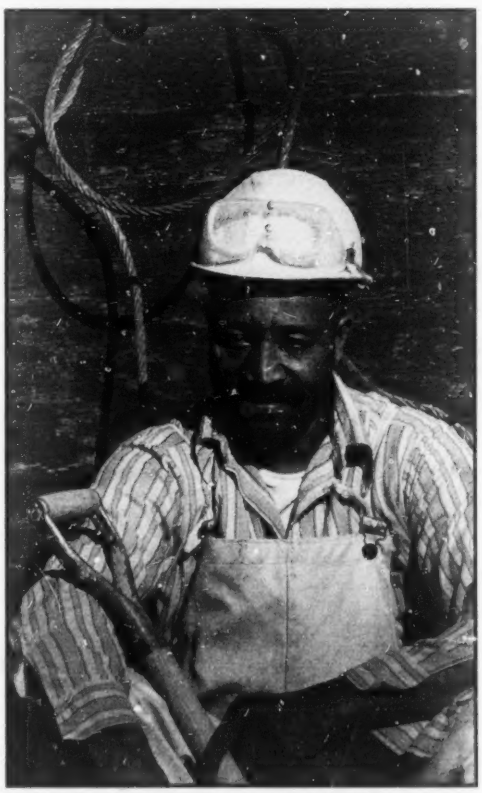
African Americans always have been an important component of the U.S. labor force. Until recently, they entered the labor force at younger ages and retired at older ages than other Americans. Working women were commonplace in the African-American community long before a majority of white women entered the labor force. But African Americans have more trouble finding jobs than other Americans, and they are more likely to be laid off during an economic slowdown.

The job prospects for African Americans appear to have worsened during the past decade, but analysts disagree about the main root of the labor market problems. Sociologist William J. Wilson blames the decline in stable, higher-paying blue collar jobs in the industrial cities.[44] Others focus on continued racial discrimination and negative stereotypes held by white employers. The movement of more jobs to the suburbs, where fewer blacks live, may be another factor. And, the lower educational achievement among blacks continues to thwart their advancement.

In the 1950s, over half of black women age 25 to 54 worked, compared with about a third of white women in those ages. By the late-1970s, the large numbers of white women entering the labor force pushed their labor force participation rates up to the same level as those of black women.[45] In 1990, 58 percent of both African American and white women age 16 and older were in the labor force.

Among men, however, rates of labor force participation have been falling over the past few decades as men spend more years in school and retire at younger ages. But the decline has been steeper for black than white men. The percentage of black men in the labor force began to drop after 1970, with the decline accelerating after 1980.[46] In 1990, 70 percent of black men age 16 and older were in the labor force, compared with 77 percent of white men.[47]

Unemployment rates, which rise and fall according to the health of the economy, have been about twice as high for blacks as for whites for several decades. The recessions of the 1970s and 1980s hit African-American workers especially hard, causing the gap between white and black unemployment to widen. In 1982, 20 percent of black men were unemployed, 2.3 times the unemployment rate of 8.8 percent for white men. While unemployment rates have fallen, the racial gap remains. In 1990, the unemployment rate was 11.8 for black men, compared with 4.8 percent for white men.[48] Blacks also remain unemployed for longer periods than do whites. Blacks account for nearly 30 percent of the long-term unemployed, persons



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without work for at least 27 consecutive weeks.

The unemployment rate understates the labor market woes of African Americans, however. Many blacks are underemployed: forced to work fewer hours than they would like. A significant number are classified as discouraged workers—those who have given up trying to find a job, and who are missed by unemployment statistics. In some communities, the lure of easy income from drug trafficking or other illegal activities siphons off a number of potential workers, further skewing unemployment figures. The official rate also excludes persons in prison—blacks account for nearly half the inmates in state and federal prisons.

Racial discrimination appears to remain a real barrier to the full participation of blacks in the labor force. Even after accounting for differences in age and education, blacks have a harder time finding a job. A recent study of young men seeking entry-level jobs in Washington, D.C., and Chicago found that the white men received favorable treatment, including job offers, more often than equally qualified black men.[49] Many employers harbor negative opinions of blacks, particularly those exhibiting the speech and dress patterns of the inner city.[50] Other evidence has shown that, among men with five or more years of college, blacks are more likely to be unemployed and to work fewer hours than whites.[51]

## Occupations

At the beginning of the 20th century there were a handful of black professionals: ministers, teachers, and some doctors and lawyers. Almost all African-American professionals had graduated from black universities and colleges and primarily served the black community. But most African Americans were delegated to menial, dead-end jobs. In 1968, the famous Kerner Commission report on African Americans stated:

> Negro workers are concentrated in the lowest skilled and lowest-paying occupations. These jobs often involve substandard wages, great instability and uncertainty of tenure, extremely low status in the eyes of both the employer and employee, little or no chance for meaningful advancement, and unpleasant or exhausting duties.[52]

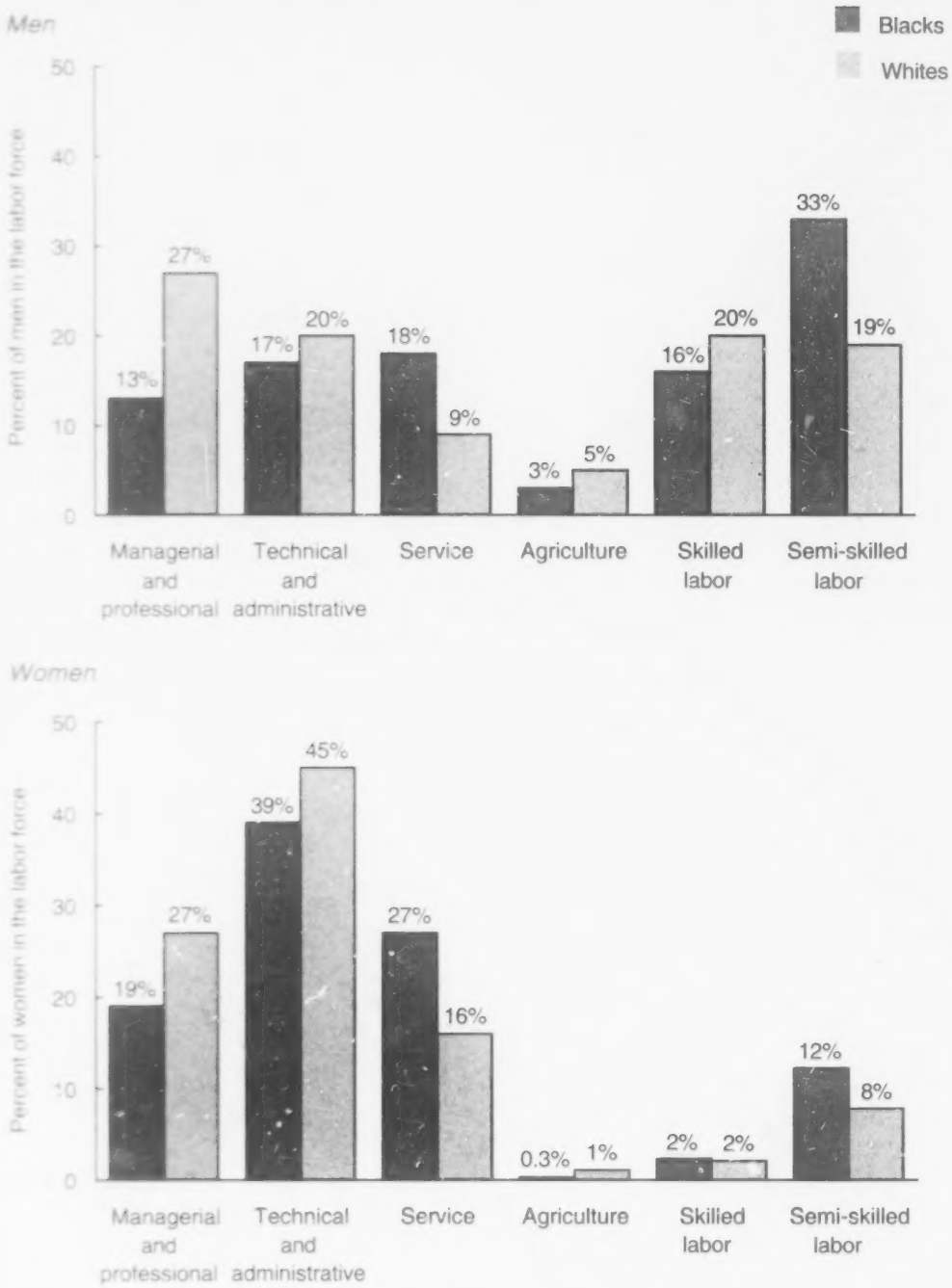
The struggle to gain entrance to higher status and higher paying jobs for blacks was bolstered by civil rights legislation passed during the mid 1960s. The new laws banned racial discrimination in the labor market and created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to enforce the new laws.

Large employers, government agencies, and federal contractors came under heavy pressure to hire and promote more minority workers. While few blacks have made it into the top echelons of American business or government, more have entered a wider variety of jobs. The taboo against putting blacks in jobs in which they would supervise whites has weakened, and many African Americans hold managerial and professional positions. The percentage of black men in the professional and managerial occupations rose from 4 percent in 1949 to 13 percent in 1990. A remarkable improvement, but far short of parity with other Americans. In 1990, white men were twice as likely as black men to hold a job in administration, management or a profession. Conversely, black men were more likely to work as semi-skilled laborers and twice as likely as white men to hold service jobs (see Figure 7).

The differences between black and white women are less striking, perhaps because American women are less likely to enter high-level jobs. Considering that 42 percent of black female employees worked in domestic service in 1949, the change in their occupational profile is dramatic.

*Figure 7*

**Blacks and Whites by Occupation, 1990**




Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment and Earnings* 38, no. 1 (1991), table 22.

In 1990, 19 percent of black women were in managerial and professional occupations, and 39 percent were in technical or administrative. While these percentages are well below those of white women in higher paying jobs, the gaps are narrower than they are for men.

The greatest shift of African Americans into more prestigious jobs took place before 1980. In the 1970s, the number of black men holding

executive, administrative, or managerial jobs rose 8 percent each year, while the number of white men entering these jobs rose by 4 percent. Among women, the number going into these jobs grew 14 percent annually for blacks and 10 percent for whites. During the 1980s, the number of whites and blacks entering high-status jobs grew at about the same rate. Racial differences in occupational distribution declined little, if at all, during the 1980s.[53]

## Black-Owned Businesses

Another source of economic status is business ownership, which many blacks see as vital to their long-term economic advancement. The number of black-owned businesses has grown dramatically since 1972, but the overall impact on the economic status of the black community has been minimal.

The number of black-owned businesses grew from 187,600 in 1972 to 424,200 in 1987, according to the Census Bureau, a 126 percent increase in just 15 years. Most of these new businesses, however, were very small firms. In 1987, for example, only 17 percent of black-owned firms had any paid employees, and less than 1 percent had more than 100 employees. Average receipts for a black-owned firm totaled $46,600 per year. Indeed, blacks remain heavily under-represented among business owners. Blacks own about 3 percent of the nation's firms, and those firms account for only about 1 percent of business receipts.[54]

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## Future African-American Workers

The African-American share of the U.S. labor force is projected to increase from 10 to 12 percent between 1990 and 2000. More important, blacks will contribute up to 20 percent of the new entrants to the labor force.

These new workers will confront a different mix of jobs and promotion opportunities than did their parents. Managerial, professional, and technical occupations that require advanced training and offer relatively high earnings potential are projected to grow the fastest between now and 2000. These occupations, however, are not expected to produce the greatest *number* of new jobs. The largest number of new positions will be created for low-paying jobs in the service sector, such as retail salespersons, janitors, restaurant workers, or office clerks.[55] Many policy observers are concerned that the American economy will evolve into a two-tiered system of high- and low-wage jobs, and that blacks who lack the educational training required for upward job mobility will become disproportionately clustered in the bottom tier.

Many analysts fear that this two-tiered occupational structure will divide blacks along educational and socioeconomic lines, creating a class of persistently poor blacks. Education is often touted as the ticket out of this quagmire. However, the economic returns for educational attainment are not as lucrative for blacks as they are for whites. Furthermore, jobs requiring highly educated workers will contribute only a small propor-

tion of the total number of new jobs in the near future. This does not argue against improving educational levels among blacks, but it does suggest that education may not be a sufficient condition for achieving better jobs and higher incomes.

# Income, Wealth, and Poverty

As more African Americans moved into better jobs, their incomes rose. Black family incomes increased during the 1950s and 1960s, but beginning with the recession in the early 1970s, the income levels for blacks have stagnated. In 1989, the median annual income for black families was $20,200, a 6 percent improvement over 1980 after adjusting for inflation, but slightly below the comparable figure for 1969.[56]

White families, in contrast, continued to increase their incomes during the 1970s and 1980s, albeit at a lower rate than during the expansionary years just after World War II. The ratio of black to white earnings has actually fallen. Black family income was 61 percent that of whites in 1969, but only 55 percent as high as in 1989.

Why have black families lost ground over the past two decades? Demographic factors explain part of the loss. Foremost among them is the growth in female-headed families, which pulled a larger proportion of black families into the lowest income groups. In 1989, black female-headed families had only a third the annual income of black married-couple families, $11,600 compared with $30,700.

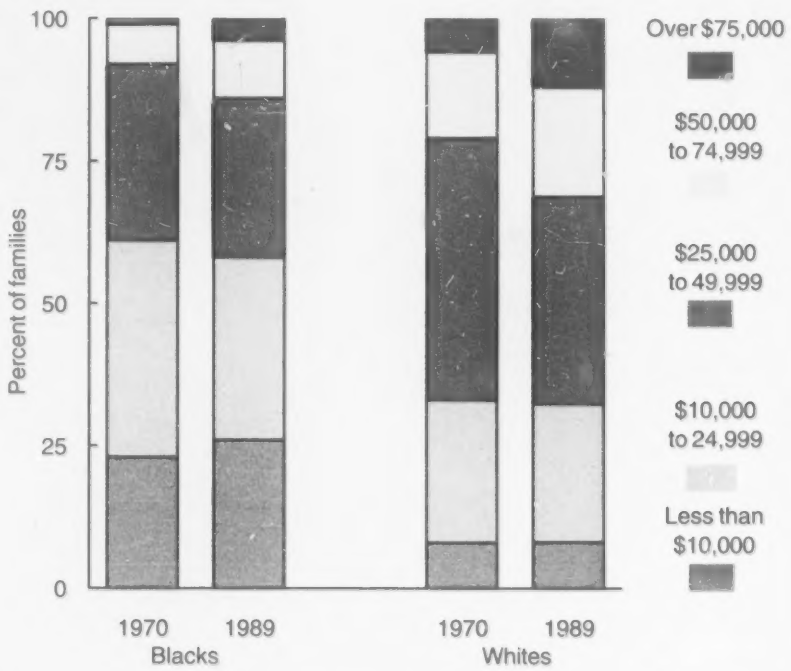
Also, the average black family has fewer members in the labor force than white families, 1.51 compared with 1.67 in 1989. This 10 percent difference is explained by the lower participation of blacks in the labor force, higher unemployment rates, and greater percentages of single-parent households among black than white families. Even if blacks and whites held comparable jobs and earned equal pay, the higher number of wage-earners per family for whites would keep their average family income above that for blacks.

## Age, Family, and Education Differences

Average income figures also fail to show the vast diversity within the African-American population. While the percentage of low-income families is much greater among blacks, there is also a solid middle class. The plethora of studies on blacks in poverty may give a distorted view of the African-American population.[57] Only a few writers have focused on the middle-class and affluent blacks, yet these groups have increased significantly.[58]

In 1989, 26 percent of black families had incomes below $10,000,

*Figure 8*
**Median Family Income for Blacks and Whites, 1970 and 1989**




Source: Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports* P-60, no. 168 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1990), table 8.

32 percent earned between $10,000 and $25,000, and 42 percent received $25,000 or more per year. Among whites, however, only 8 percent of families had incomes under $10,000, while 69 percent were in the $25,000 or over category (see Figure 8).

Income levels differ markedly by educational level, age, and family type. Black married-couple families, for example, increased their earnings during the 1970s and 1980s. By 1989, the median income for blacks had grown to 82 percent that of whites for families in which both husband and wife worked.

In families headed by younger blacks, especially those with a college degree, average income is almost as high for blacks as it is for whites. Among married-couple families where the head of household is 25 to 44 years old and a college graduate, the median income of blacks ($54,400) is 93 percent that of whites ($58,800).[59]

Female-headed families rank at the bottom of the income distribution, but there is considerable diversity even within this group. The extremely low median income of black female-headed households—less than $12,000, compared with nearly $19,000 for white female-headed households—is partially attributable to the lower educational levels and the lower percentages of divorced women among blacks. White women are more likely to obtain a legal divorce, and therefore to receive alimony or child support, an important source of additional income. Among white and black women with similar marital and educational characteristics and who head their families, however, the income differences diminish. Average incomes for families headed by single women who are college graduates are no higher for white than for black families.

While a college education erases some of the income difference between whites and blacks, blacks do not reap the same financial rewards from education as do whites. The average incomes for blacks invariably are lower than for whites, regardless of educational level or geographic area (see Table 9). Race differences are somewhat smaller in the South than in the North, especially in nonmetropolitan areas where all incomes are lower.

*Table 9*

**Median Income and Poverty Rates by Education in Three Geographic Areas: Blacks and Whites Age 25-44, 1989**

| | Metropolitan North | | Metropolitan South | | Nonmetropolitan South | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Black | White | Black | White | Black | White |
| Median personal income (dollars per year) | | | | | | |
| Less than high school | $5,700 | $9,800 | $6,000 | $8,300 | $4,900 | $8,200 |
| High school only | 13,000 | 17,000 | 12,500 | 15,100 | 10,000 | 13,000 |
| Some college | 18,100 | 21,800 | 17,000 | 19,000 | 12,600 | 16,900 |
| College graduate | 26,000 | 30,100 | 24,000 | 29,000 | 20,000 | 22,500 |
| Poverty rate (percent) | | | | | | |
| Less than high school | 51 | 23 | 41 | 26 | 52 | 25 |
| High school only | 24 | 6 | 18 | 8 | 24 | 10 |
| Some college | 13 | 3 | 13 | 4 | 23 | 6 |
| College graduate | 4 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 6 | 4 |

Source: Authors analysis of the March 1990 Current Population Survey.

## Affluent Blacks

African Americans experienced a growing economic polarization during the 1980s, widening the split between rich and poor. Although their success has been overshadowed by the plight of poor blacks, a growing number of blacks have become affluent since 1980.

Affluence is an imprecise concept. With the variation in costs and standards of living, no single income level measures affluence for all families across the country. In most regions, however, a family with a yearly income of $50,000 or more would be considered affluent. Using this definition, the number of affluent blacks has grown substantially since the mid-1960s. In 1989, nearly one in seven black families had an income of $50,000 or more (in constant dollars) compared with 1 out of every 17 in 1967. The number of affluent black families increased from 266,000 in 1967 to just over 1 million in 1989, nearly a four-fold increase. Affluence is still less prevalent among blacks than whites, however. In 1989, nearly one in three white families had incomes of $50,000 or more, up from one in six white families in 1967.[60]

The number of affluent blacks grew steadily from 1967 until the late 1970s, then fell sharply during the recession of the early 1980s. Following the recession, the number of affluent black families underwent a phenomenal growth. By 1989, there were nearly twice as many affluent black families as there had been just 10 years earlier.

This surge in the number of affluent blacks may be a product of the economic expansion that followed the 1981-1983 recession, but it may also represent the first fruits of the 1960s civil rights movement that opened up so many new opportunities in education and employment for blacks. Black children of the civil rights era were the first generation to benefit fully from the expansion in education and equal opportunity laws. Young blacks who were in school in the 1960s reached their 30s and 40s in the 1980s, the ages at which increased educational attainment begins to pay off financially. The life chances of many older blacks were dictated by the more rigidly segregated society before the 1960s. In pre-civil rights society, particularly in the deep South, there were almost insurmountable obstacles to economic advancement for blacks.

Who are these affluent blacks? Like affluent whites, they tend to be well-educated (32 percent are college graduates), homeowners (77 percent own their own home), in the prime-earning ages (66 percent are age 35 to 55), married (79 percent are married), and suburbanites.

Also like affluent whites, most black families reach the $50,000 a year income level by combining earnings from two or more family members. Less than 2 percent of black adults have personal incomes in excess of $50,000 a year.[61]

## Accumulated Wealth

While income is the most commonly used measure of economic status, it can also provide a misleading picture of the real economic gap between whites and blacks. Total wealth, which includes the assets accumulated over a lifetime, is a more comprehensive measure of a family's financial situation. Income reflects the short-term flow of money into a household without revealing how much money is leaving. Furthermore, wealth may be inherited from previous generations. Thus, the relative economic status of the current generation of whites and blacks reflects racial inequities of the past.

The gap in the assets owned by blacks and whites reveals a much bigger disparity than most other measures of socioeconomic status. Blacks account for only 4 percent of households with assets of $50,000 or more. And, while black income is roughly 60 percent that of whites, the median net worth (total assets less liabilities) of black households in

1988 was only about one-tenth that of whites, as shown in Table 10. Furthermore, the median wealth of whites is higher than that of blacks at every income level. Even among those in the highest income quintile, blacks have less than half the wealth of whites.

Only 16 percent of black households had assets of $50,000 or more in 1988, compared with 47 percent of white households. Over half of black households reported assets of $5,000 or less, and nearly 30 percent reported no assets at all. Only 9 percent of white households claimed no assets whatsoever.

The wealth gap between blacks and whites provides a stark reflection of the tenuous economic circumstances facing blacks. Without an accumulation of assets to fall back on, sudden unemployment or a health-care crisis that could be weathered by a family with more resources could push many black families past the breaking point.

Part of the wealth gap can be explained by the younger age structure of African Americans as well as the history of racial oppression they have endured. Younger people have had less time and fewer opportunities to accumulate assets. As a general rule, age and wealth go together. However, today's older African Americans—who grew up during a period of overt discrimination—have not had much opportunity to accumulate many assets. Even after accounting for age, the wealth gap between blacks and whites persists. Even worse, younger blacks appear to be falling further behind. Among those age 65 and older, the median wealth of whites is nearly four times that of blacks. Among those under age 35, it is 10 times greater.

One might also argue that black wealth lags behind that of whites because a large share of black households are female-headed families. While this explains part of the wealth gap, it is not the whole story. The median wealth of white married couples in 1988 ($62,400) was still 3.5 times that of black married couples ($17,600). Among female-headed households the median wealth of whites ($22,100) was 2.9 times that of blacks ($800).

Equity in a home is the single largest asset for most Americans, accounting for 43 percent of aggregate wealth. But the homeownership rate for blacks is about two-thirds that of the total population. Even among those who own their home, the amount of equity in black-owned homes is only 60 percent of the national average.

Homes owned by African Americans have a lower average value than those of whites. In 1987, the median value of homes owned by blacks was $48,800, compared with $69,300 for whites.[62] The market value of black-owned homes has remained lower primarily because of residential segregation. Potential buyers or renters for homes in predominately black neighborhoods are primarily other blacks. They are not only fewer in number compared with whites, but they are also less affluent. With whites unwilling to move into

*Table 10*

**Black and White Households by Net Worth, 1988**

| Networth (in dollars) | Blacks (percent of total) | Whites (percent of total) |
|---|---|---|
| Zero or negative | 29.1 | 8.7 |
| 1 to 4,999 | 22.8 | 13.9 |
| 5,000 to 9,999 | 8.1 | 5.9 |
| 10,000 to 24,999 | 11.6 | 11.5 |
| 25,000 to 49,999 | 12.9 | 13.1 |
| 50,000 to 99,999 | 10.3 | 17.7 |
| 100,000 to 249,999 | 4.4 | 19.3 |
| 250,000 to 499,999 | 0.7 | 6.7 |
| 500,000 or more | 0.1 | 3.2 |
| Median net worth | $4,169 | $43,279 |
| Total households (in thousands) | 10,278 | 79,169 |

Source: Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports* P-70, no. 22 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1990), tables 2 and 5.

predominantly black neighborhoods, the demand for, and therefore the value of, black-owned housing is reduced.

**Home Values and Residential Segregation**

Because the incomes of blacks are lower than those of whites, one might suspect that residential segregation is simply a product of people with different incomes living in different parts of town. However, income differentials between blacks and whites account for only a small part of residential segregation. Poor blacks seldom live in the same neighborhoods as poor whites. Even well-to-do blacks and whites often live in different neighborhoods.[63]

Discrimination in housing explains only part of the persistent residential segregation in the United States.[64] Personal preferences also play a role. A large share of both blacks and whites say they desire to live in an integrated neighborhood, but their perceptions differ on what actually constitutes integration. In one recent report, black respondents in several large cities expressed a preference for neighborhoods that were equally divided among black and white residents. Whites preferred to live in an "integrated" neighborhood in which 80 percent of residents were white and only 20 percent black.[65] A neighborhood that is 40 percent black and 60 percent white would not be considered fully integrated to the black residents, while white residents might think the same neighborhood is past the "tipping point" and is on the way to becoming all black. These fundamental differences in the perception of integration have not been widely recognized or fully appreciated.

## Blacks in Poverty

In 1959, over half (55 percent) of blacks were officially poor. By 1969 the poverty rate among blacks had fallen to 32.2 percent, but it has been virtually stagnant ever since. During the last 20 years the poverty rate for blacks has varied between a low of 30.3 percent in 1974 and a high of 35.7 percent in 1984. The most recent data available indicate that the poverty rate among blacks in 1989 was 30.7 percent.*

The rate of poverty among blacks has been roughly three times the rate for whites over the past two decades. But yearly poverty rates do not reflect many of the differences in the poverty experiences of whites and blacks.

Education does little to diminish the wide poverty gap between blacks and whites, as shown previously in Table 9. Graduating from high school halves the chance that blacks will be in poverty, but it cuts the poverty rate for whites by at least two-thirds in northern and southern metropolitan areas. Also, for all education levels, poverty rates for blacks are about as high in northern metropolitan areas as they are in the rural areas and small towns of the South.

One important aspect of black poverty is the concentration of blacks in high poverty areas, especially in big cities. Among those who lived in the central cities of metropolitan areas in 1989, 71 percent of poor blacks lived in high poverty areas, compared with only 40 percent of poor whites.

**Poverty Gap**

Poor blacks are poorer than poor whites. Poverty status indicates whether a family is above or below the official poverty income threshold, but it does not reveal how far below the threshold a family is. In 1989, the average poor black family had an income $5,100 below the poverty

*The poverty rate is the percentage of families or individuals whose annual income falls below a threshold specified by the Office of Management and Budget. The thresholds vary by family size and composition and are updated for inflation annually. In 1989, the average poverty threshold for a family of four was $12,675.

line, while the average poor white family had an income only $4,000 below the poverty line.

Poor black families are slipping deeper into poverty. Between 1979 and 1989, the income deficit (the gap between the poverty threshold and the average income of poor families) grew 23 percent for black families. The deficit also grew for poor whites, but not by as much. These trends reflect the economic polarization during the 1980s: families in poverty got poorer while families at the top end of the income scale got richer.

Blacks are also more likely to be poor for long periods. The population of poor Americans is rather fluid, as many families and individuals move in or out of poverty due to a short-term job loss or change in family status, but a small core remain poor for sustained periods.[66] Blacks are over-represented in the latter group, accounting for 62 percent of the persistently poor between 1969 and 1978. More recently, 28 percent of whites who were poor in 1985 moved out of poverty within a year, while only 17 percent of poor blacks escaped poverty during that year.[67]

Moreover, the government's official poverty index may not capture all of the poor. When the American public was asked what income level should be used to determine poverty, they reported a significantly higher income threshold. If this "real life" poverty threshold were used, 39 percent of blacks would be considered poor rather than the 31 percent recorded using the official poverty line.[68]

**Use of Welfare**

The high concentration of blacks in female-headed households, their long-term poverty status, and their lack of assets help explain African Americans' relatively high rate of participation in means-tested welfare programs. Eligibility for means-tested programs is limited to individuals or families with incomes below a minimum level (that is, of insufficient means). Among the poor, blacks are twice as likely as whites to participate in most of the major means-tested welfare programs, such as food stamps, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), free or reduced-price school lunch, or Medicaid.[69] It should be noted, however, that fewer than half of poor black households participate in most welfare programs.

The higher rate of participation in welfare among poor blacks may also be related to their demographic composition. An overwhelming number of families participating in the AFDC programs (many of whom also receive food stamps, Medicaid and public housing) are headed by single women. Since poor blacks are more likely than poor whites to be in single-parent families, a larger share may be eligible for welfare. Furthermore, 61 percent of poor blacks and only 34 percent of poor whites live in central cities. Because of high population densities, social services are usually more easily provided in large cities than in isolated rural areas. Also, the concentration of welfare recipients in certain neighborhoods within cities may lower or remove any stigma attached to participating in welfare programs.

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## Economic Diversity

Are the persistent poverty and welfare dependency among a small segment of African Americans evidence of a growing underclass? Although academics and journalists have popularized the term "underclass," the exact definition is hotly debated. The term itself has fallen into disfavor. Some sociologists have suggested substituting "ghetto poor" for underclass, claiming that the original term has taken on a pejorative meaning that equates the underclass with the undeserving poor.

Accordingly, there is little consensus as to the size or racial composition of the American underclass, or as to whether it is growing. Most analysts would agree that only a minority of poor individuals are part of the underclass. The concept encompasses more than just poverty. It extends into the social climate usually associated with poor inner-city neighborhoods where crime, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancy are familiar phenomena. Because low-income blacks are overrepresented in the poverty and inner-city populations, they are at the center of the underclass debate.

The steady rise in the number of middle-class and affluent blacks during the past few decades stands in stark contrast to the growing concern about large numbers of blacks stuck in a permanent underclass.

What do these diverse trends mean for the black community? As more blacks gain the trappings of middle class status, will they be in a better position to help impoverished blacks? African Americans have a history of helping one another,[70] and the newfound affluence is a potential pool of wealth to improve the lot of the poor. As middle-class blacks gain confidence in their position, they are likely to take on a greater leadership role. As they accumulate wealth that can provide a cushion against harder times, middle-class blacks may be willing to devote more resources to helping others.

On the other hand, the growing affluence of one segment of the black population may prove to be divisive. Middle-class blacks living in the suburbs will find it harder to identify with blacks stuck in declining central cities. Only time will tell whether the shared history and strong family and community bonds will unite middle-class and impoverished blacks or whether disparate economic positions of these two groups will lead to a more fragmented African-American population.

# Political Participation

Politics is one arena in which the increasingly segmented groups of African Americans may still share common interests. In 1991, there are no black U.S. Senators and only one black state governor, but more blacks are running for office and more are getting elected. Although African Americans are becoming more diverse politically as well as economically, they still constitute a solid voting bloc. They are overwhelmingly allied with the Democratic party, and they tend to support African American candidates.

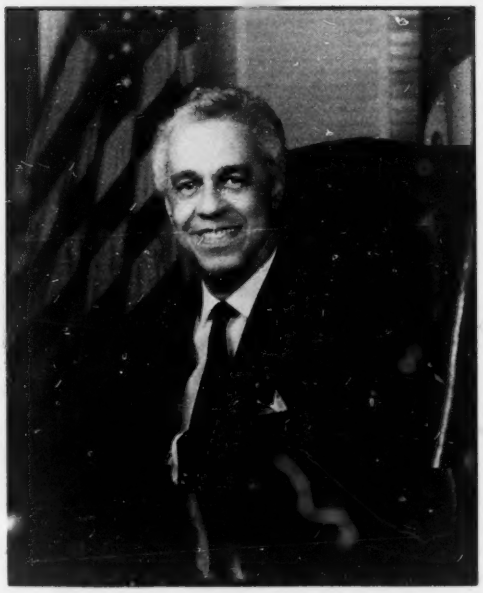
The passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was one of the major victories of the civil rights movement. Prior to this, blacks, especially those in southern states, had been discouraged or overtly barred from voting. Requirements for voters' registration, such as literacy tests and poll taxes, were primarily instituted to keep blacks out of the voting booth. As late as 1962, only 5 percent of voting-age blacks in Mississippi and 13 percent of those in Alabama were registered to vote. Northern blacks were much more likely to vote, although their participation still lagged behind that of whites.

After discriminatory election laws were struck down, voting registration drives throughout the South brought thousands of blacks to the polls for the first time. Between 1952 and 1968, the wide gap between the

percentage of southern blacks and whites voting in presidential elections disappeared. In fact, young blacks voted in greater percentages than young whites in the South, perhaps buoyed by promise of attaining real political power.

More recently voter turnout among blacks has waned, as it has for most Americans. Between 1972 and 1988, the percentage of blacks voting for president fluctuated between 49 and 56 percent, while the percentage of whites voting ranged from 59 to 65 percent. In off-year congressional elections, black turnout increased from 34 percent in 1974 to 43 percent in 1986, while the percentage of whites voting hovered around 47 percent. Still, smaller percentages of blacks than whites turn out for nearly all elections.

Why do blacks fail to exercise their right to vote? Part of the answer may lie in the demographic characteristics of the black population. Blacks share many of the characteristics of other Americans who fail to vote in large percentages: they are younger, less educated, less likely to own a home, and have below-average incomes. These facts alone could account for their low voter turnout. Also, many African Americans may see little relation between who is elected and the fate of their community interests. As the number of blacks entering public life increases, they may become more involved in the electoral process.



*Lawrence Douglas Wilder, who became governor of Virginia in 1990, was the first African American elected governor of a U.S. state.*

## Black Elected Officials

The number of African Americans elected to public office has skyrocketed over the past two decades. Between 1970 and 1979, this number swelled by 234 percent, helped along by the Voting Rights Act. During the 1980s, the rate of increase slowed. Still, the number of blacks holding elective office rose from 4,912 to 7,226 between 1980 and 1989, an increase of 47 percent. Some analysts argue that the large increases of the 1970s were a function of the small number of blacks in politics at the beginning of the decade and may never be equaled. Many black-majority political districts are already represented by an African American. Thus the main means through which blacks entered elective politics is no longer available.

While the number of black elected officials has grown impressively, African Americans still represent a tiny fraction of the membership in city, state, and federal legislative bodies. In 1977 there were 4,311 blacks holding elective office, 0.9 percent of all elected officials in the country in that year. By 1987 there were 6,681 black elected officials, representing 1.3 percent of all elected officials.

There are also telling differences in the levels of elective office African Americans are holding. Between 1980 and 1989 the number of black elected officials at the county and municipal levels increased by 76 and 53 percent, respectively. By contrast the number of blacks holding statewide and federal positions increased by 31 and 41 percent respectively.[71]

Blacks have better luck winning

local races because U.S. elections are characterized by racially polarized voting: blacks tend to vote for black candidates; whites tend to vote for white candidates. While blacks account for only a small share of the national electorate, and for less than a third of the voters in any state, many city and congressional district populations have a majority of blacks and other minorities. Accordingly, there has not been a black U.S. Senator since Edward Brooke (R-Massachusetts) left office in 1979, but there are 24 blacks in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1991. Of these, 15 were elected from districts with a black majority. Another seven were elected from districts in which blacks and Hispanics formed a majority. The racial composition of a jurisdiction is believed to be the strongest single indicator of black electoral success.[72]

As we enter the 1990s, there are indications that black candidates are gaining wider support among whites, a necessary condition for blacks to be better represented among elected officials. Several well-publicized contests of the late 1980s and the early 1990s demonstrated the willingness of whites to support black candidates. The election of Douglas Wilder in the 1989 Virginia gubernatorial race, of David Dinkins in the 1989 New York City mayoral contest, and of Gary Franks, a Republican, to the U.S. Congress from Waterbury, Connecticut, in 1990, are some recent examples of widespread cross-over voting by whites. In these cases, blacks were elected from jurisdictions in which blacks were a minority. About 18 percent of Virginia's voting-age population is black; only 4 percent of Waterbury, Connecticut is black.

## The Future of African Americans

The history of the black population in the United States is fairly well documented, but what does the future hold for these Americans? Many of the forces that will shape the advancement of black Americans have been described above, but it is not clear what the sum of these forces portends.

Many of the trends outlined here suggest that the black population will be more diverse as America moves into the 21st century. The economic gap between rich and poor blacks is growing. Many black scholars argue that *race* will lose significance while *class* divisions gain importance. Already, many young blacks who spent most of their lives in post-1960s America see issues differently than their parents, who grew up enduring overt racial oppression.

The middle-class blacks of the future may feel little in common with poor blacks because their experiences will have been dramatically different in so many ways. By the year 2000, every black under age 40 (nearly 60 percent of the black population) will have grown up in the more hospitable post-1960 racial climate.

Yet racism—one of the major forces that led blacks to rely so heavily on one another—is still very much evident. While the attitudes of whites toward blacks have softened a great deal over the past few decades, many still harbor discriminatory attitudes. Indeed, efforts to promote fuller participation of blacks in colleges and the work force have generated claims of reverse discrimination by some whites. Furthermore, the actions of many whites in the voting booth, in hiring, and in decisions of where to live are at odds with the benign attitudes expressed in opinion polls. To confound matters, the rapid growth of Hispanics and Asians may imperil black economic advancement, heighten group tensions, and lead to stronger black cohesiveness. While the future of America's black population is uncertain, it is clear that African Americans will continue to be a highly visible feature of the American social and political landscape.

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## Discussion Questions

1. Why was the proportion of blacks in the U.S. population higher in the 1880s than it has been for most of the 20th century?

2. Discuss the components of the Immigration Act of 1965 that enabled the number of black immigrants to increase.

3. Compare the demographic characteristics of the African-American population with those of whites, Hispanics, and Asians.

4. What were the specific "push and pull" factors that led blacks to move from the South to the North between 1940 and 1970? What factors spurred the southern resurgence after 1970?

5. Discuss the determinants of family formation in the black community. How might current trends in mortality and joblessness among black men affect African-American family patterns?

6. Speculate on the prospects of today's black youth in future labor markets. How will their experiences compare with those of their parents and grandparents?

7. What factors contribute to the wealth gap between whites and blacks?

8. Discuss the implications for the future of blacks in the United States given current trends in health, education, and economic status.

9. Did the 1990 Census give an accurate count of African Americans? Should the count be adjusted? Why or why not?

*Prepared by Kimberly A. Crews*

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